

A Taste Of Freedom by HanShaped

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Summary: Mike hardly believed almost five months had passed since that fateful night when everything in his life—turned upside down in the autumn of 1983—had pieced together once again. And all it took was for her to be back. / A short and fluffy one-shot, focusing on that sweet little thing between Mike and El.

A Taste Of Freedom

A/N: It's a repost of a fanfic published on Ao3 on October 28th, 2017.

I hope everyone is in character.

This one I have mixed feelings about. I really wanted to post it, because I'm really proud of a second half of it, but a first half... not so much.

But it's here anyway.

And I hope you'll like that shameless fluff with those lovable kids being kids and figuring love out.

Enjoy!

A Taste Of Freedom

Who would have thought that the spring of 1985 would come round so quickly and liven Hawkins up so much, the whole town and its surroundings exploding with colours. It could have not come to be had it not been for the successful outcome of their fight against the Mind Flayer last November. Mike hardly believed almost five months had passed since that fateful night when everything in his life—turned upside down in the autumn of 1983—had pieced together once again. And all it took was for *her* to be back.

He still caught himself smiling at the memory of seeing her for the first time in nearly a year, of how different she had looked, and yet so strikingly familiar. Of hearing her calling his name with her voice cracking, sheer emotions visible on her face. Of how great and soothing it had felt to have her in his arms once again. Of his tears soaking into her jacket, while he had been trying to swallow his sobs.

Even in his wildest dreams, he hadn't dared to expect her to come back at that time. He'd been far from losing hope, but the idea of her return actually happening had become more and more surreal with every passing day. And then she had showed up, saving their lives

and saving Hawkins all over again. This time, however, she had been still here at the end. Just like she had promised.

A thought that the spring came round in its fullest just for El to admire it crossed Mike's mind several times, as he couldn't help himself but realise that it was her first spring she could experience as an actually free person. Although she still couldn't wander too far away from the cabin or roam Hawkins on her own, Hopper let her meet with her friends from time to time and she was spending a lot of time at the Byers'. In consequence, the party's meeting point was moved from the Wheeler's basement to the Byers' living room.

Of course, Mike would rather have El come over to him, but for now Chief insisted on keeping her presence low-key, and, as much as Mike hated it, he had to agree. Luckily, his willingness to compromise provided him with a chance to spend some time with her on their own once in awhile. Hopper wasn't a big fan of their "dates", but he wasn't naïve either. Well-aware that those kids would always find a way to see each other, he preferred to know about it, so he could keep an eye on them.

Mike remembered the first time they had gotten a chance to spend some time alone after her return. It was quite a fun little stroll in the woods, as they weren't allowed to walk too far away from the cabin. He was still processing all of this, trying to wrap his mind around a journey she had just told him about.

"So, your real name is Jane," he made sure, getting a nod from her as a response. His eyes were locked on the trees before them. He swallowed a lump in his throat, as a wave of guilt flooded his heart. "Would you like me to call you Jane?," he asked, the name sounding strange to his ears. Before she had a chance to answer, he continued: "I guess now that you know your real name, calling you Eleven is... wrong, and I'm sorry for that." He winced, his hands fidgeting.

He felt her gaze on him, and then she grabbed his hand, squeezing it reassuringly. "Mike, you did nothing wrong," she insisted, smiling affectionately. "And I really like when you call me El," she admitted softly, coming to a stop.

He looked at her, unable to keep a tender smile from lightening up

his face. "El it is, then," he said, his eyes locked on her.

For a moment he could swear a weird energy started to surround them, pulling them towards each other. However, before any of them could move even slightly, they heard Hopper's voice calling them in the distance. That was the end of their first "date", but it marked the beginning of something exciting Mike thought he would never get to experience.

Every time they hung out afterwards, Mike tried to come up with a different activity they could engage in. From watching movies (Mike was even more than willing to show El the ones he liked the most, so that she could better understand the references he or their friends sometimes made), through listening to music, reading comics (he couldn't wait to show her the X-Men, even though none of them was as amazing as her), playing games, to teaching her how to ride a bike, they were enjoying every moment they spent together.

And today, with the sky almost cloudless and the temperature relatively high, he decided to have a little picnic by the lake that was located nearby Chief's old trailer. It was Hopper who had proposed the spot, and Mike reluctantly agreed, forced to admit that a place actually seemed pretty nice.

He brought a small basket with him, filled with Eggos, candies, fruits, and cookies that his mother had baked a day before, one of the blankets that had created a rooftop of the fort tucked underneath his shoulder. El was already waiting for him by the shore, watching as wind created small creases on the surface of the lake. With light reflecting in them, the view must have mesmerised her, because she didn't even seem to notice his presence.

Mike himself hardly paid any attention to the lake, though. He was surprised to see El dressed in a long-sleeved blue dress that reached her knees, revealing a pair of light pink socks and white sneakers. He hadn't seen her wearing a dress in quite a while, and it didn't fit a bit more punk style she preferred lately. Although she tried many new clothes that she was getting either from Nancy or Will's mom, she didn't pick any dresses, at least until now.

Placing the basket carefully on the ground, Mike took a deep breath,

trying to stop painful memories from filling his mind. Despite a different colour of the dress, similarities in her appearance made him recall that fateful night in November of 1983. He shook his head, convincing himself that it was all a distant past now, not worthy of his time.

Mike cleared his throat, unwilling to startle her. "El," he greeted her happily, as she turned around.

"Mike." She smiled lightly, and quickly approached him in a few steps.

"I brought some things you might like," he said light-heartedly, reaching for the blanket.

She helped him to spread it out on the grass, and soon they found themselves laying beside each other, delicate, humid breeze grazing their feet. El insisted that she hadn't been hungry yet, preferring to just lay down for a while and watch the world around them. It didn't cease to amaze him how she could find even such an ordinary activity so enjoyable.

"I like the feeling, Mike," she confined casually after a few minutes of companionable silence, her starry eyes locked on a cloudless blue sky.

"The feeling?," he echoed, trying to figure out what she meant.

"Freedom," she breathed lightly, clearly tasting the word on her tongue. And then an incredibly broad smile brightened up her face.

All that Mike felt was a pure joy mixed with a childlike wonder, radiating from the girl lying just inches away from him. He couldn't help but think about opening up presents on the Christmas Day, and how her expression now had to mirror the one of every child on that magical morning. And somehow that association turned out to be even more fitting, as he had never seen her smile like that. Granted, it happened more often now than ever before, but if genuine, her smiles were frequently shy and restrained, giving him the impression that she still struggled with showing her emotions.

Now, however, was completely different. The smile—a grin, actually—not only reached her eyes, adorning their corners with adorable little wrinkles, but it also seemed not to be repressed at all. A sense of serenity accompanied it, as she let the corners of her mouth lift as much as it was only possible, her eyes almost closed.

Mike had no way of expecting to get to see such a wonderfully delightful showcase of emotions, coming from the very same girl, who, with just her presence, seemed to lighten up his every day. And seeing her so happy—so *carefree*—only made his heart flutter.

He couldn't look away from that wonder of a girl, and soon a murmur escaped his now dry mouth. "I love it when you smile. You look so pretty." And then he stiffened, mortification filling all of his body, as he watched in horror her head slowly turning in his direction. Had he really said something so stupidly cheesy out loud?

For a moment he hoped she hadn't heard his words, but his worry seemed to vanish entirely, as tender brown eyes locked with his. "You think?," she whispered, her smile slowly disappearing, and he had to do something to stop it, a sight too extraordinary to be gone so quickly.

"Yes," he answered, simply and surely. It took him a second to realise that what he had just said sounded very Eleven-like. It seemed that she had already rubbed off on him more than he was ready to admit.

However, it turned out that just that one word was all she needed to hear. And then that wonderful smile once again appeared on her face.

Mike was quite sure that if he hadn't already been lying on the ground, he would've certainly found himself on it now, swept of his feet. Moments before, he couldn't see much but a half of that beautiful smile, directed at the sky above them. And now that smile was all for him to marvel at.

He gulped, feeling a weird, slow shift in the air around them. Although he couldn't put his finger on what was an exact cause of that, he found himself being drawn closer to El, even though their hands had already been almost touching. Maybe she was a really strong magnet after all? That would explain a lot.

Unfortunately, his thoughts got all messy and tangled as if on cue with her turning on her side. Mike followed suit, slowly reaching out a hand in her direction. His fingertips brushed her cheek gently, only to trace her lips as her smile grew even more. Mike's fingers were slightly trembling, yet he didn't withdraw his hand.

With a heart furiously thumping in his chest, he leaned in closer, so that their foreheads were almost touching. El didn't stiffen nor flinch away, apparently relaxed and comfortable even with him being so close to her. Instead, she held his gaze, and he could swear that in such a close proximity her eyes looked even more mesmerising. "You are so pretty," he whispered, his breath surrounding both of their faces with warmth. "And incredible. And kind. And amazing," he quickly listed, feeling his cheeks reddening. "And I'm so happy you're here." He mirrored her smile, retracting his hand, only to have it grasped between cool, delicate fingers.

"I am too," she agreed and then softly said: "I am happy that you found me back then." She cast her eyes down, looking at their intertwined hands. "Thank you," she managed after a moment, her voice small and more emotional than ever before, but Mike could see a smile playing in the corners of her lips.

He squeezed her hand reassuringly. "Hey, I couldn't just leave you there," he said delicately. "You always help a friend in need."

"A friend..." She furrowed her eyebrows slightly. "You are my most great friend, Mike."

"Greatest," he corrected her warm-heartedly.

"Yes." She nodded and looked into his eyes once again, as if pleading for him to say something more.

"You're my most great friend, too, El," he echoed her choice of words, with a light-hearted smile. "And you will always be."

That weird energy seemed to be all around them once again, and he could tell that she felt it too. "Promise?" Her voice was barely above the whisper.

"Promise," he murmured softly, just before their lips met in a gentle kiss.